



## Research & Evaluation Team

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Web logs (*blogs*) are online journals that are typically used by individuals to write about their lives or to provide commentary on current events. Others—friends, family, or a wider community of interest—can read the blog on the Web and add comments to entries, building a discussion around them.

Educators have used blogs in class with the hope of increasing learners' engagement, reflection, and collaboration. Blogs have also been used to reduce feelings of isolation in distributed learning classes. In this article, we review research publications describing these case studies.

For each study, we describe how students and instructors used blogs, and the results they achieved. Very few of these studies used empirical measures, and none performed a comparative evaluation. Therefore, no clear conclusions can be made on effectiveness yet. However, these pioneers' experiences do indicate some of the common factors behind a successful implementation, and from these we derived a set of guidelines for the integration of blogs into both traditional and online courses.

## Introduction

Blogs are perhaps the original “Web 2.0” technology. For the aspiring writer, blogs are an easy, low cost platform for publishing on the web. Blogs are presented to readers in journal format; each article is a “post” and posts are organized by date. A community forms around a blog, as readers add comments to the discussion board that is below each article. The author retains overall ownership, however, as only he or she can create new posts.

Although individuals, journalists, and marketers have embraced blogs, their use in the classroom has been limited so far. They promise to improve learning and collaboration by providing an accessible forum for discussion, to reflect upon learning, and for students to work together. These features are in accordance with “social constructivist” pedagogy, which implies that they may be especially valuable to adult learners.

But what is the right educational environment for blog use? How should they be implemented? Are blogs really better than established technologies, such as class mail-lists and online discussion forums? Findings from research on blogs in higher education can help to address these issues.

## Blogging in the Classroom

A search of the EBSCO Education database for articles with “blogs” in their title, and “evaluation” or “study” elsewhere in the text, resulted in 132 articles—of which only four documented empirical research. None of these studies measured educational effectiveness per se—principally, they surveyed students' reactions to determine whether blogs enriched learning, improved group cohesion, and reduced feelings of isolation.

**Results of Unguided Use:** In two of the studies we examined, students were encouraged to use blogs, but were not given specific directions.

Shailey Minocha and Dave Roberts (2008), of the UK's Open University (a distance learning university with 200,000 students) performed a year-long trial of both blogs and wikis. Blogs were suggested as a possible tool for “learning reflections.” In follow-up interviews, Minocha and Roberts found that students liked sharing their experiences with classmates, with some exceptions. Some lacked the confidence to reflect effectively in a public medium. Others were unsure of the purpose of using blogs. The authors concluded that guidance on how to use the tool is important.

Similar findings emerged from the use of blogs in a MBA course taught at the University of Brisbane, Australia. Researchers Jeremy Williams and Joanne Jacobs (2004) provided blogging facilities that could earn students class credit if they wrote at least five “meaningful” entries. Other than that, no guidance was given. Results indicated that students were ambivalent about the value of blogs—roughly half did not opt to use them, and of those that did, one third were not convinced that they aided learning. On the other hand, 77% agreed that blogs improved “intellectual exchange” between students.

## Learning and Team Development

In contrast to the first two studies, Rose Goldman, Amy Cohen, and Fred Sheahan (2008) of Harvard University's School of Public Health made blog use mandatory. Their "seminar blogs" were created by small groups of students, who collectively submitted two to three assignments per week.

Following course completion, 60 students were given evaluation surveys. The researchers found that of native English speakers, 57% thought that using blogs helped them learn core material and 36% thought that blogs helped them learn non-core material. Non-native speakers (21% of the class) were even more appreciative with 78% reporting that blogs helped them learn core and non-core material.

However, neither native nor non-native students were convinced that "blogs helped them develop as a group," as only 4% answered "quite a bit," while 62% answered "slightly" and 34% answered "not at all."

## Reducing Student Perceptions of Isolation

The feeling of being isolated is a particular concern in distance learning environments. Geographically distributed students can become detached and unmotivated without a social space to mix with their peers.

"I miss being in a class with other students."  
"I got a lot of feedback, but I still felt like I was alone."  
—Student reactions from Minocha & Roberts (2008)

Michele Dickey (2004) of the University of Miami studied whether mandatory blogging could reduce distance learners' feelings of isolation. She divided students into small groups and asked them to take turns posting one "reflection" a week. Learners took to the system, posting and following-up on others' posts, writing friendly group messages, and sharing personal experiences and feelings. Of the 66 students that ultimately submitted course evaluations, none expressed feelings of isolation—down from 30-40% in previous years.

## Guidelines for Effective Blog Use

Based on our review of the literature, we recommend the following guidelines for incorporating blogs into training and education.

**Consider the Educational Context:** All of the studies we examined focused on blogs in higher-education courses. Two of the selected studies were set in classrooms, while the other two were professional-level online courses. Crucially, all stated the importance of having instructors to guide and monitor blog use.

**Determine How Blogs Should be Used:** In each of the studies, learners were given directions on how to use their blog. These included:

- **Reflect on individual experience of the course—** Each learner has a blog, and students use them to reflect upon what they are learning and how it relates to their own experience. Other learners (or the instructor) provide comments.
- **Team development—** The class is divided into teams, each of which has a blog. The blog is used in an unconstrained manner to strengthen bonds between members and to promote discussion.
- **Peer-to-peer criticism—** A blog is created for each team, and team members take turns posting assignments. Other team members submit criticisms and provide discussion.

In addition to their basic requirements, learners were free to use their blog as they saw fit.

**Provide motivation:** Learners posted more when blogging earned class credit.

**Make sure teaching assistants are clearly briefed:** Teaching assistants (or instructors) can provide feedback for blog authors, but to be effective, they must be well briefed. For instance, assistants must know how to address students' anxiety over public exposure and lack of technical know-how.

**Create a privacy policy:** Students are more comfortable if they know who has access to their blog and what they will be assessed on.

**Assert writing expectations:** Blogs work best when students are concentrating on writing in a formal style. Encouraging a conversational style promotes speed and spontaneity—and hence more interaction between students.

## Conclusion

Blogs are emerging as a valuable tool for encouraging reflection and strengthening ties between students. They can help those most disadvantaged in classroom discussion, such as remote learners and non-native speakers. Additional benefits, such as greater team collaboration, may require an instructor to guide and monitor students.

We expect blog use to continue to grow in amenable educational environments. Software vendors will likely produce blogs with specialized educational features, e.g. instructor controls for "team blogs." Regardless of precise format, blogs will contribute to the learning experience for many years to come.

## References

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